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# Assessing Deviance, Crime and Prevention in Europe

Approximating  
the Truth about Crime.  
Comparing crime data based on  
general population surveys with  
police figures of recorded crimes

Jan VAN DIJK

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# APPROXIMATING THE TRUTH ABOUT CRIME. COMPARING CRIME DATA BASED ON GENERAL POPULATION SURVEYS WITH POLICE FIGURES OF RECORDED CRIMES

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Jan Van Dijk

*Both men had spent their professional lives working for the police and thus had long ago learned the sovereign truth of crime statistics: to the degree that the process of reporting a crime is made difficult and time-consuming, the numbers of reported crimes will diminish*

Donna Leon, *The Girl of his Dreams*, London, William Heinemann, 2008

In a Coordination Action called *Assessing Deviance, Crime and Prevention in Europe* (CRIMPREV) funded by the European Commission under FP6 and coordinated by the *Groupe européen de recherches sur les normativités* (GERN/CNRS), one work package<sup>1</sup> was devoted to *Methodology and Good Practices*. The last workshop of this workpackage focused on a comparison of crime data based on general population surveys with statistics of police-recorded crime (police figures). National reports were prepared by Marcelo Aebi (U. Lausanne, for Switzerland), Bruno Aubusson de Cavarlay (CNRS/CESDIP, for France), Mike Hough (King's College, for the United Kingdom), Joachim Obergfell-

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<sup>1</sup> Core Group : Philippe Robert (CNRS, CESDIP), Renée Zauberman (CNRS, CESDIP), Amadeu Recasens i Brunet (U. Barcelona), Michel Marcus (EFUS), Rossella Selmini (Città sicure, U. Macerata).

Fuchs (*Kriminologischer Dienst, Justizvollzugsschule*, Baden-Wuerttemberg, for Germany), Karin Wittebrood (*Sociaal en Cultureel Planbureau/SCP*, for the Netherlands). Jan Van Dijk (University of Tilburg) was in charge of the general report. A seminar – gathering the core group, the national and general rapporteurs and some observers – took place in Barcelona (September 2008). This paper is a synthesis written by the general rapporteur. It provides an account of the national reports and the debates that went on during the seminar.

## **I - Subject matter**

Since their first publication, police figures of recorded crimes are known to suffer from several inbuilt limitations. First, they reflect only crimes known to police forces, missing the so called ‘dark numbers of crime’, the crimes that are never reported to or detected by the police. Police figures are said to reflect just the tip of the iceberg of true crime. Second, police figures are strongly affected by the scale and effectiveness of policing activities. Trend data may therefore not necessarily reflect trends in actual crime but trends in policing efforts or priorities instead. In addition, official police figures are strongly affected by recording policies and practices of the police. They are therefore susceptible to possible manipulation and misrepresentation for political purposes. Finally, police figures in most countries are still mostly based on aggregate statistics and therefore cannot provide information on the characteristics of the incidents including of the victims involved.

Crime victimisation surveys are interview-based surveys among samples of the general public about personal experiences with crime, regardless of whether they have been reported to the police or not. The surveys were introduced as a means to produce estimates of the numbers of crimes that are produced independently from administrative data of the police. They were supposed to

produce statistics of crime that include the 'dark numbers' and are not distorted by investigative efforts of the police or variable practices of police recording.

Victimisation surveys have undoubtedly improved statistical information on crime and they are generally recognised as a cornerstone of empirical criminology. Victimisation surveys, however, also suffer from several inherent limitations, as will be discussed in more detail below. Survey-based estimates of crime cannot be taken at face value either. From the outset we want to emphasise that searching for a measure of the true measure of crime is like searching for the Holy Grail. All sources of statistical information about crime reflect social constructions of the phenomenon under study. In the case of police statistics the figures reflect the crime problem as construed by law enforcement agencies and politicians, prosecutors or judges supervising their work. Police figures give us the official or statist view of the problem of crime. Crime victimisation surveys reflect crime problems as perceived and memorised by samples of ordinary citizens. These perceptions might be erroneous from a legal perspective. Both social constructions are liable to be biased in their own special ways.

Comparisons between the results of victimisation surveys with statistics of police recorded crime have initially been conducted in the hope to determine the dark number of crime and to arrive at the 'true numbers of crime'. This analytical approach has been especially prominent in the USA where the national victimisation survey was specifically launched with the view of monitoring and, where necessary correcting, the national police figures (Lynch, Addington, 2007). The National Crime (Victims) Survey (NCVS) was set up as a parallel system of the Uniform Crime Reporting System. For this reason the selection of types of crime covered and the operational concepts used in the questionnaires of the NCVS conform as closely as possible to those in the Uniform Crime Reporting System of the country. Typi-



cally, the key results of the NCVS have always been published in the form of estimated absolute numbers of crimes committed. These estimated absolute numbers could be superficially compared by any reader with the annual police figures published by the Federal Police. In line with the key objective of the surveys to monitor police figures, the questionnaire includes no questions on attitudes of the public concerning crime as is common in European surveys. Another characteristic of the NCVS is its exclusive focus on national crime trends, ignoring local variation or cross-national comparisons.

Over the years numerous in depth studies on concurrence between the two series have been conducted in the USA (for overviews see Bidermann, Lynch, 1991; Lynch, Addington, 2007). The main conclusion of these studies is that such comparisons are fraught with so many methodological problems that especially comparisons between the two alternative measures of the level of crime are hardly feasible. The original objective of determining the true level of crime seems to have been abandoned. Also, analyses of concurrence nowadays tend to focus on *change estimates* rather than on *level estimates*. Studies on convergence or divergence of the two sources are now generally seen as an analytical tool to better understand the factors determining how the two systems produce crime statistics. In a review of the issues, Lynch and Addington (2007) argues that police figures of recorded crime and survey results should be seen as complementary to each other. Both offer valuable and unique information about crime problems. In his view concurrence analysis can help to identify the relative strengths and weaknesses of both statistical series as indicators of different aspects of the crime problem.

In Europe, the first crime victim surveys were developed not by statisticians but by criminologists working for either government-funded research institutes as in The Netherlands, United Kingdom, Poland or France,

or by universities (e.g. in Germany and Switzerland<sup>2</sup>) (Zauberman, 2008a & b). The criminological outlook of the first European surveys is reflected in their methodologies. The first European studies typically focused on measuring volume crime as perceived by the public using definitions and concepts taken from colloquial language rather than from national legislation (e.g. the offences of car vandalism, pickpocketing or consumer fraud). European surveys typically also included extended sets of questions on fear of crime and opinions about police performance or sentencing. Unlike the NCVS in the USA, most reports on European surveys refrain from presenting estimated absolute numbers of crime. European reports typically present prevalence and incidence rates of victimisation per 100,000 as their key findings.

In order to make tentative comparisons with the statistics of crimes recorded by the police, results of European surveys must be adjusted post hoc to better approach the legal definitions used in police administrations (the identifications of comparable subsets in both series). Subsequently, incidence rates per 100,000 persons or households must be ‘grossed up’ to arrive at estimates of the absolute numbers of crimes experienced by the population (Van Dijk, Steinmetz, 1980; Wittebrood, Junger, 2002; Lagrange *et al.*, 2004; Allan, Ruparel, 2006). The comparisons in Europe are further complicated by the fact that national figures of police-recorded crimes are often less rigorously standardised than in the USA. In England and Wales, a system of Uniform Crime Reporting has only recently been introduced. In other countries uniform crime statistics are still hardly

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<sup>2</sup> In Germany the first surveys were conducted by academic scholars such as Stephan, Schwind, Kury and Pfeiffer (Stephan, 1976; Schwind *et al.*, 1975, 1978, 1989; Kury, 1991; Wetzels, Pfeiffer, 1996). All Swiss National Crime Victim Surveys were conducted by the School of Criminal Sciences of the University of Lausanne and directed by Martin Killias.

available at the federal level at all (*e.g.* in Belgium and Switzerland). If American researchers have found such comparisons to be a daunting challenge, in the European context the exercise can be characterised as a ‘mission impossible’. After initial attempts to calculate dark numbers in Germany (Stephan, 1976; Schwind *et al.*, 1978) and The Netherlands (Buikhuisen, 1974; Fiselier, 1978; Van Dijk, Steinmetz, 1980), interest waned. For this reason the European literature on the issues of convergence or divergence is relatively modest and no literature reviews have ever been made. As in the USA, more recent studies tend to focus on time series (change estimates) rather than on estimated numbers of crimes (level estimates). In Europe relatively more attention has over the years been devoted to analysing convergence or divergence between victimisation rates and measures of fear of crime. Another European pre-occupation has been the comparison of victimisation rates across cities, provinces or countries, *e.g.* between the North and South of Germany or the West and the East (Wetzels, Pfeiffer, 1996; the German report in this seminar). To facilitate international comparisons, a European group of crime researchers launched in 1987 the International Crime Victims Survey which is now in its sixth round (Van Dijk, Mayhew, Killias, 1990). The time series of the ICVS allow analyses of the changes in the ranking of European countries according to the level of victimisation (Van Dijk, Van Kesteren, Smit, 2007). This comparative analysis has repeatedly stirred up debates in the media, especially in countries at the top of the ranking for certain crime types such as the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, The Netherlands, Ireland and Iceland (Van Dijk, 2007a).

In the CRIMPREV study presented here scholars from France, Germany, Italy, The Netherlands, Switzerland and the United Kingdom have tried to compare results of national crime victimisation surveys with national police figures over a time span of two or more decades. This collective effort usefully fills a gap in the existing Euro-

pean knowledge on crime statistics. It allows a revisiting of the some of the conclusions drawn in the extensive American literature from a European perspective. The conduct of such analysis in six different countries with highly divergent national systems of police figures and victimisation surveys adds a unique comparative dimension. To further broaden our analysis we will also draw upon the (European) results of the ICVS. In this report we will try to arrive at evidence-based conclusions on the relative strengths and weaknesses of the two statistical sources. We will also suggest some possible policy implications for the development of a system of (uniform) crime statistics within the European Union.

## **II - Comparing official and survey-based level estimates for six European countries**

Italy has twice participated in the International Crime Victims Survey and a national survey has recently been launched by the Statistical Office (ISTAT) that is now being repeated for the third time (Muratore, Tagliacozzo, 2004). According to the CRIMPREV report on Italy, no work has yet been done on comparing survey-based data with police figures at either national or local level. One reason for this lack of interest is that national police statistics collected by the Ministry of the Interior were till recently paper-based and have recently been fundamentally overhauled, compromising the comparability of police figures over time. The Italian national report outlines some of the other conceptual problems of comparing survey results with police figures such as the problem that police figures only reflect crimes committed and reported within a given territory and omit victimisations that have taken place elsewhere.

In Germany, victimisation surveys at the national level have only been executed a few times and most relevant literature is based on one-off, local surveys. Local crime surveys have mainly been conducted for

purely academic interests or to support local crime prevention policies. Researchers have, *inter alia*, examined differential trends in the old and new *Länder* after the unification with East Germany (Wetzels, Pfeiffer, 1996) or levels of crime in the North and South (Kury, Obergfell-Fuchs, Würger, 1995). Innovative work has been done on multilevel analyses of differential victimisation risks of population groups with the use of police figures or other aggregate crime statistics as contextual information (Oberwittler, 2003). The Max Planck Institute for Foreign and International Criminal Law has been partner in two rounds of the ICVS (Kury, 1991). Their analytical work on the ICVS has focussed on methodological issues and on correlates of fear of crime and punitiveness rather than on trends in crime (Kühnrich, Kania, 2005).

The German national report nevertheless lists no less than 34 national or local studies wherein survey-based data have been compared with data from other sources. The results showed that survey-based estimates were universally higher than police figures with 'dark numbers' being more pronounced for less serious (violent) crimes than for property crimes (*e.g.* Stephan, 1976). The apparent reasons for this difference are higher reporting and recording rates of property crimes for reasons of insurance. Many studies have also found that officially recorded crimes tend to be significantly lower than the estimated numbers of incidents reported to the police according to surveys.

In France, The Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Switzerland several studies have been carried out on concurrence between level estimates according to both sources both locally and nationally. Results confirm that such comparisons are indeed far from straightforward. Many cumbersome, and sometimes somewhat imaginative, adjustments had to be made of both categories of data to arrive at roughly comparable data-

sets<sup>3</sup>. The national reports consistently show that for almost all types of crime, estimates of the numbers of crimes committed according to victimisation surveys are significantly higher than those recorded by the police. This result forms an empirical confirmation of the traditional criminological assumption about the existence of huge ‘dark numbers’. They also show that in most cases even the estimated numbers of crimes reported to the police by victims are consistently and significantly higher than the police figures. The latter findings were also found in Germany. It suggest that in all five countries police forces, regardless of legal systems and instructions in place, apply a wide range of discretion in their decisions whether or not to make an official notification of citizen’s reports and include it in the official count of crime. As in Germany, the comparisons of level estimates are less divergent for serious property crimes such as car theft or household burglary than for crimes of violence. Together, the results lead to the conclusion that in Europe, as in the USA, official counts of crime consistently and seriously underestimate the true volume of crime and that *de facto* discretion in recording reports leaves ample scope for political manipulation of police figures.

In the French national report the observation is made that proven divergences between survey-based estimates and police figures should be an impetus for police forces to revisit their discretion in processing or not processing victim reports. Police forces should be requested to become more transparent about the screening or ‘pruning’ of citizen’s reports of committed offences. At the same time, the reports also comment on the many limitations of survey estimates. The list of

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<sup>3</sup> For example, national police data from Switzerland are only available in very broad categories. Whenever necessary, data were weighted according to Zurich police statistics – which provide a more detailed presentation of offences – in order to produce an adjusted national police incidence rate.

limitations and sources of possible error in these estimates is long. Surveys among households omit victimisations of minors, businesses and of tourists and other non-residents. Homicides cannot be measured other than by asking respondents about family members who may have been murdered. Due to their modest sample sizes, the surveys have limited potential to measure other rare, serious crimes including aggravated assault and rape. They also have limited capacity to produce estimates of complex or victimless crimes such as trafficking in illegal products and services and grand corruption. Surveys furthermore struggle with measuring correctly multiple or serial victimisations, especially those committed by intimates. Numerous studies have also shown the tendency of crime victimisation surveys to undercount the prevalence of violence in a domestic setting (Lynch, Addington, 2007). Finally, victimisation surveys suffer, as said, from measurement problems inherent in all survey research such as memory decay of respondents asked to report on past events, forward time telescoping, and biases in sampling designs and in net samples due to non-response. All survey results, finally, are, of course, subject to statistical sampling error<sup>4</sup>.

With the exception of forward time-telescoping and statistical sampling error, limitations and proven sources of error tend to systematically deflate rather than inflate the estimated numbers of actual crimes. Victimisation surveys can therefore be said to possess their own ‘dark numbers’. The initial claim that surveys can provide a measure of the true size and nature of the crime problem has proven to be untenable. With the current understanding, it seems more realistic, as stated in the

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<sup>4</sup> In England/Wales the comparison between the two series is further complicated by the difference in reference periods. Since the redesigned national victimisation survey started to apply a rolling reference period, annual rates have to be constructed.

German report, to conceive victimisation surveys and police figures as measures of different types of criminality that can complement each other. They should no longer be regarded as competing measures of the same phenomenon.

The emerging consensus among the experts participating in the seminar in Barcelona was that surveys are better at assessing the level of stereotypic volume crimes that are comparatively poorly reported to or recorded by the police. This category includes petty thefts, including pickpocketing and non-motor vehicle theft, burglaries, non-commercial robberies, acts of vandalism and assaults between strangers. Levels of motor vehicle theft can probably be measured relatively well by both systems and can therefore be used for the purpose of cross-validation of the surveys (Lynch, Addington, 2007)<sup>5</sup>. According to the French experience population surveys provide a more comprehensive picture of drugs use among the general population. However, such surveys possess their own biases by not including homeless and other marginalised groups. Police-based data on drugs offences committed among marginalised groups can complement the survey data in this respect.

In all countries police-based systems seem better placed for measuring very serious crimes of violence such as homicides. None of the two systems seems capable to furnish reliable estimates of acts of violence in a domestic setting. For the measurement of this, politically important, category of crime dedicated studies using special modes of data collection seem called for (Johnson, Ollus, Nevala, 2007).

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<sup>5</sup> However, also here concurrence cannot be taken for granted. The two series of French statistics on car theft/theft from cars showed significant divergence, probably due to unstable recording by the police (Zauberman, Robert *et al.*, 2009).



### **III - Country comparisons of the level of crime according to both sources**

Cross-national comparisons of crime problems can be used to understand the macro-sources of crime and for the purpose of benchmarking national crime control strategies. For both academic and policy purposes, then, it is important to be able to compare the level of crime across countries or jurisdictions. On the assumption that the size of the dark numbers is roughly similar across countries, it is sometimes believed that statistics of police recorded crime, although underestimating the volume of crime, can yet provide a reliable ranking of countries according to the severity of their crime problems. This assumption provides the justification for ongoing cross-country comparisons of police figures as collected by INTERPOL or UNODC.

The ICVS offers the opportunity to compare levels of crime on the basis of survey-estimates. The project also provides an opportunity to study concurrence between the survey-based ranking and those according to international police figures. The correlation between country ranks in terms of ICVS victimisation rates and police-recorded crime rates has previously been examined for a limited number of Western countries (Van Dijk, Mayhew, Killias, 1990). The authors reported that strong correlations between survey-based rankings and rankings according to police figures were found for car theft but only moderately strong ones for household burglary and robbery. No correlations were found concerning violent crimes, including for sexual crimes. For the categories of property crimes the correlations became significantly stronger if the victimisation rates were corrected for reporting rates. The latter finding was to be expected, since by adjusting for reporting rates one of the major sources of error in the police figures is eliminated.

In a subsequent analysis using data from a broader

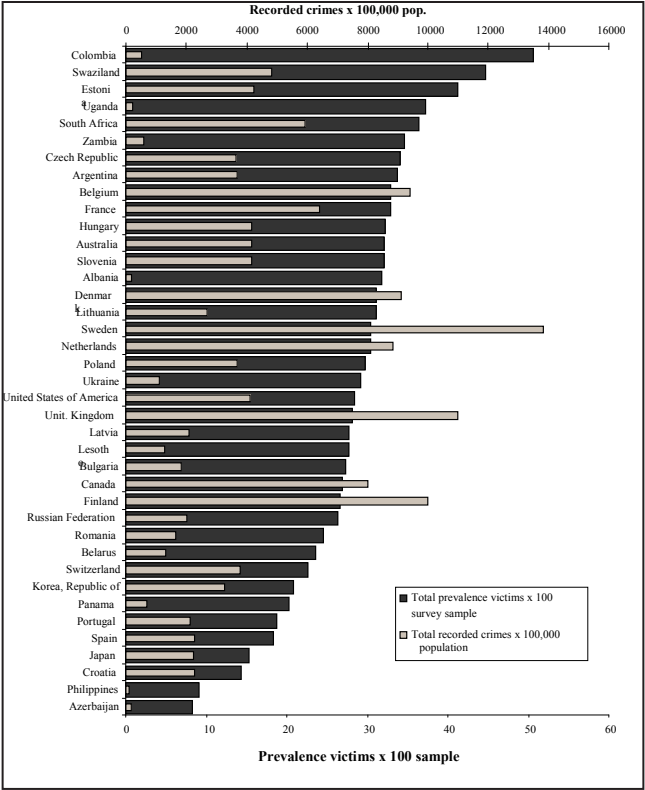
and less homogeneous group of countries from Europe and North America the convergence between relative positions in victimisation rates and recorded crime rates was found to be weaker (Mayhew, 2003). For example Russia and the Ukraine featured in the top quartile for victimisation and in the lowest for recorded crime while Finland scored in the top quartile for recorded crime but in the lowest for victimisation. As in the previous study, a higher correspondence was found between recorded crime rates and victimisation rates after adjustments were made for varying reporting rates.

Aebi, Killias and Tavares (2002) analysed the correlation for twelve mainly Western European countries between the 2000 ICVS-based victimisation rates for all crimes with the total police-recorded crime rates of the European Sourcebook project, adjusted for reporting (using ICVS data). Their findings confirm the earlier findings of Van Dijk, Mayhew and Killias (1990) and Mayhew (2003), in the sense that robust correlations were only found after adjustment for differences in reporting. Results thus show that among developed countries, recorded crime rates cannot be reliably used as indicators of the relative level of crime. In order to be used for such comparative purposes recorded crime rates must first be corrected for reporting and ideally, if at all possible, for recording practices of police forces as well.

Howard and Smith (2003) looked at the relationships between police figures of the UN Crime Survey, European Sourcebook and Interpol and between these three official measures of crime and ICVS victimisation rates. Their analysis was once again limited to Europe and North America. Their conclusion was *that official measures of recorded crime are mostly consistent in their depictions of crime rates while official measures and victimization measures were typically in disagreement*. Their results show that for the groups of countries under study, official measures collected by

the UN, the European Sourcebook or Interpol are reasonably consistent amongst themselves but show little or no resemblance to rankings based on crime survey research among the public. They also concluded that analyses of the social correlates of crime showed fundamentally different, even opposing results, depending on the data sources used, thus putting in doubt most of the existing knowledge on the macro-causes of crime based on official crime data.

A further test of the usefulness of recorded crime as measure of the relative level of crime should include



Sources: ICVS 2000 and UN Crime Survey 2002 or latest data available

Figure 1 – Total crime, by countries

crime survey and the ICVS contain a measure for ‘total crime’. For 39 countries data is available on the overall ICVS victimisation per 100 respondents in 2000 and the total numbers of crimes per 100,000 recorded by the police in 2002. Figure 1 depicts both the number of recorded crimes per 100,000 inhabitants and the percentage of the public victimised by crime according to the ICVS (Van Dijk, 2007a).

In the 39 countries with information from both sources, on average 28% of the respondents to the ICVS were victims of at least one crime of those included in the survey. Victimisation rates in the majority of countries (23) were close to the average (between 23 and 33%), while six were well below (Azerbaijan, Philippines, Croatia, Japan, Spain and Portugal) and ten markedly above. Among them, the countries where citizens were most frequently victimised were Colombia, Swaziland, Estonia, Uganda, South Africa, Zambia and the Czech Republic. In contrast, the highest levels of police-recorded crime were observed in Sweden, United Kingdom, Finland, Belgium, Denmark, Netherlands and Canada, while in Colombia, Uganda and Zambia, which as just mentioned appeared in the group of countries with the highest rates of victimisation, police-recorded levels of crime are comparatively low. It can be observed that four out of six countries with the highest victimisation rates were in Africa, while among the six countries with the highest levels of police-recorded crime five belong to the 15 Member States of the European Union before enlargement.

From a European perspective, it is worth noting that new members of the European Union such as Rumania, Bulgaria and Lithuania show relatively low police figures and moderately high victimisation rates. This finding suggests that dark numbers are comparatively high among new Member States.

The results show that there is absolutely no correla-

tion between the actual level of victimisation by crime and the rates of crime recorded by the police among these 39 countries ( $r=0.212$ ;  $n=39$ ; n.s.). Some countries with exceptionally high numbers of recorded crimes also show comparatively high victimisation rates (South Africa) but many others such as Finland, Canada and Switzerland do not. The comparison between country rankings according to ICVS victimisation rates and police recorded crimes was repeated for different types of crime. The results showed positive correlations for robbery ( $r=0.663$ ;  $n=37$ ), and car theft ( $r=0.353$ ;  $n=34$ ), while no correlations were found for any other type of crime. An analysis of the correlation between ICVS victimisation rates and police-based crime rates of European countries showed the same results (Gruszczynska, Gruszczynski, 2005).

## **1 - Reporting patterns across the world**

One of the strengths of victimisation surveys is that they can give insight in the willingness of citizens to report crimes to their local police. In the case of the ICVS the survey provides comparable estimates of the willingness to report to the police. For ease of comparison, reporting levels were in the ICVS calculated for five offences for which levels of reporting vary across countries and/or experience of victimisation is comparatively high.<sup>6</sup> These offences are thefts from cars, bicycle theft, burglary with entry, attempted burglary and thefts of personal property. Table 1 shows reporting percentages for these five types of crime together in 2003/2004.

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<sup>6</sup> Omitted are car and motorcycle thefts (which are usually reported and are relatively uncommon), and robbery (for which numbers per country are small). Also omitted are sexual incidents and assaults/threats. Here, the proportion reported will be influenced by, respectively, the ratio of sexual assaults to offensive sexual behaviour, and assaults to threats.

Country	1989 surveys	1992 surveys	1996 surveys	2000 surveys	2004/05 surveys
Austria			62		70*
Belgium	60	77		65	68*
Sweden		59	60	61	64*
Switzerland	67		63	58	63
Germany	63				61*
England & Wales	70	69	65	64	61*
Scotland	72		67	62	61
Denmark			.	62	60*
Northern Ireland	44		53	63	59
Netherlands	64	66	58	64	58*
Hungary					58
New Zealand		67			57
France	62		53	51	54*
Japan	.			44	54
Norway	50			.	53
Australia	61	53		53	52
Portugal				38	51*
Ireland					51*
Italy		42			50*
USA	57		58	53	49
Greece					49*
Finland	53	49	53	45	48*
Canada	55	53	52	48	48
Luxembourg					48*
Spain	36				47*
Poland		34	35	43	46
Estonia		33	28	38	43
Iceland					40
Istanbul (Turkey)					38
Bulgaria					35

\* Van Dijk, Manchin, van Kesteren, Hideg (2007)

\*\* The average is based on countries taking part in each sweep.

*Table 1: Reporting to the police of five types of crime in 2003/04 (%) in countries and main cities and results from earlier surveys.*

*1989 - 2005 ICVS and 2005 EU ICS\**

*(from Van Dijk, Van Kesteren, Smit, 2007)*

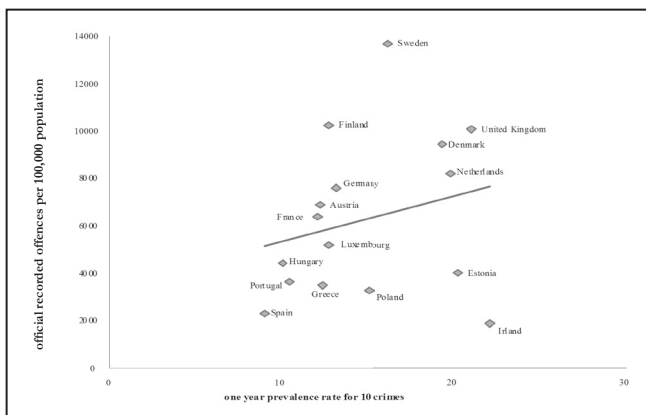
The results confirm that reporting patterns show considerable inter-country variation.

The highest reporting rates were in Austria (70%), Belgium (68%), Sweden (64%) and Switzerland (63%). With the exception of Hungary, all countries with relatively high rates are among the most affluent of the world. The information on reporting rates confirms that there is a systemic distortion in Euro-wide statistics on recorded crime in the sense that victims in new Member States are less willing to report their victimisations to the police. For this reason alone, it can safely be concluded that dark numbers of crime are larger among the new members than among the old members.

Reporting rates have gone down slightly since 1988 or 1992 in Belgium, Scotland, England & Wales, the Netherlands, France, New Zealand, USA, and Canada, but this is largely caused by the changing composition of the crimes that are reported. Reporting rates have gone up in Poland and Estonia, probably due to post-communist reforms of national police forces that have increased trust among the community. Also in Northern Ireland reporting has gone up since 1988 and 1992 in the aftermath of the peace process.

## **2 - A final test with European Union wide data**

Within a European context, the hypothesis regarding the universal nature of dark numbers can be put to a test using fresh data from the latest round of police figures of the European Sourcebook (Aebi *et al.*, 2006) and the results of the European component of the fifth round of the ICVS (Van Dijk, Manchin, Van Kesteren, Hideg, 2007). Figure 2 depicts the relationship between overall victimisation rates and numbers of crimes recorded by the police per 100,000 inhabitants.



*Figure 2 Percentages of victimisation by any crime in 2004 and police recorded crimes per 100,000 population in 2000 in selected EU Member States*

Figure 2 shows at a glance that, once again, the number of crimes recorded by the police bears hardly any relationship to the ICVS based measure of crime. The countries with the highest numbers of police recorded crimes are Sweden, Finland, United Kingdom and Denmark. According to the EU/ICVS, the level of crime, however, is relatively low in Finland and medium to high in Sweden. Countries with the lowest numbers of police-recorded crimes include Estonia and Ireland, both countries with levels of crime significantly above the European mean according to the ICVS. In the cases of Ireland and Estonia the blatant divergence between the two sources is probably caused by deficient recording of crimes by the national police forces. The results confirm our earlier conclusion that police figures are consistently lower among the new Member States of the European Union whereas this is not necessarily the case for rates of victimisation (e.g. Estonia)

### **3 - Convergence as correlated rates**

Comparisons between survey results and police figures across countries can be made both for the category



of total crime but also for specific types of crime. In the latest report on the ICVS, the crime types chosen for a more detailed analysis were motor vehicle theft, theft total, robbery, assault, sexual violence and total contact crimes (Van Dijk, Van Kesteren, Smit, 2007). Although the operationalisations of the offences in the ICVS do not correspond exactly with those used in the Sourcebook for police-recorded crimes (e. g. sexual incidents are a broader category than rape), the comparison of the individual types of crime should in theory produce better results than that of overall victimisation with total recorded crime. In order for the police to be able to record a crime experienced by a victim, the victim must have reported his experience to the police. Since reporting rates vary across countries, a better match is to be expected if national victimisation rates are adjusted for differential reporting. Police-recorded crimes were compared with both the victimisation incidence rates and for incidence rates corrected for reporting (incidence rates of reported victimisations). Results are presented in table 2.

Crime type	Incident rates and Recorded		Reported and Recorded	
Motor vehicle theft	0. 48	23	0. 47	22
Theft	0. 39	26	0. 67	25
Robbery	0. 20	27	0. 43	27
Assault	0. 37	26	0. 58	26
Sexual	0. 43	24	0. 54	24
Total contact	0. 27	24	0. 62	24

*Sources: 2000 – 2004/05 ICVS, 2005 EU ICS and European Sourcebook 2004*

*Table 2: Correlations between the ICVS victimisation rates and the recorded crime levels for 7 types of crimes in 2003/04 in 27 industrialised countries.*

For most types of crime, incidence victimisation rates are only weakly correlated to numbers of police-recorded crimes (e. g. 0. 20 for robbery and 0. 37 for

assault). The correlations between the two measures of the levels of different types of crime are stronger when victimisation rates are adjusted for reporting to the police, with the exception of motor vehicle theft (a type of crime that is almost always reported). In other words, there is closer correspondence in relative risks of crime when account is taken of differences in reporting to the police. The somewhat stronger correlations found between incidents reported to the police and police-recorded crime indicate that the number of crimes reported by victims is one of the factors determining the officially recorded input of police forces besides the recording practices of the police forces.

In the USA analysts have advocated a correlation coefficient of .80 as a minimum requirement of correlational convergence (McDowall, Loftin, 2007). In the cross-sectional analysis just discussed such coefficient is not found for any crime type, even after adjustment for reporting rates. The comparison of European statistics on police recorded crime with survey-based estimates of the true levels of crime confirms irrefutably that police figures cannot be reliably used to compare levels of crime across EU countries.

#### **IV - Trends in crime over time in five European countries**

In recent years, researchers in the USA and Europe have, as said, turned their attention to analysing concurrence between trend data from the two main sources of crime statistics. Even if the absolute numbers show huge gaps, with survey-based data usually indicating much higher levels, trends can still show convergence. Assuming that proportions of dark numbers are constant over time, change estimates from both sources might be similar, even if level estimates are not. Divergence in the trends could point at changes in the production processes of either of the two systems. The identification of such

changes can point at the differential strengths and weaknesses of the two systems. We will briefly discuss the findings on trend data from five European countries.

## 1 - Germany

In Germany national surveys have been few and far between. The analysis of concurrence between available trend data from the two systems showed mixed results. In Germany data from three national surveys showed trends roughly similar to those appearing in national police statistics but this did not hold for the new *Länder* in East Germany where reporting and recording seem to have been more variable over time. According to the national report, local surveys in Germany have often indicated trends diverging from those appearing in local police figures.

## 2 - The Netherlands

In the Netherlands survey-estimated crime counts are available since 1975. The initial survey developed by the WODC (*Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek- en Documentatiecentrum*, Research and Documentation Centre of the Ministry of Justice) has been implemented by the Central Bureau of Statistics since 1980. The questionnaire used has been a model for many of the surveys conducted in other European countries<sup>7</sup>. The Dutch survey was redesigned in 1980 and in 2004. The available integrated dataset covers the period 1980-2005.

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<sup>7</sup> The questionnaire has been a model for the first British National Crime Survey and the Swiss surveys. The Dutch questionnaire has also been the model of the ICVS, launched in 1987. This factor explains the fairly high degree of convergence between both level and the trend estimates from the Dutch and British national surveys and the five rounds of the ICVS (Van Dijk, Van Kesteren, Smit, 2007).

According to the data the level of over all crime has remained more or less stable since 1980 according to the national surveys. Police figures show an increase till the mid 1990s. The divergence is most pronounced for crimes of violence and vandalism.

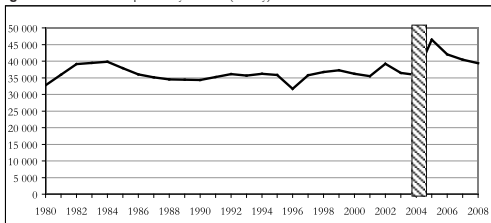
An in depth analysis showed that the upward trend in police figures is largely caused by a lowering of the threshold for recording reported offences by the police. In the Dutch national survey those who have reported an incident to the police are asked whether they have signed an official report. In the Dutch context, it can be assumed that those incidents that have not been recorded in the form of an undersigned certification report will not be officially recorded as offences. The percentage of reporting victims that said to have signed a report has gone up from 60% in the 1980s to 80% in 2004. This increase is largest for violent crimes (from 45% to 60%) and vandalism (from 40% to 75%).

In a secondary analysis of the available Dutch crime statistics between 1980 and 2004, Wittebrood and Nieuwbeerta (2006) proved that almost three quarters of the rise in recorded crime is due to the fact that the police are recording more crimes than before. Only 1 % of the increase is attributable to an increase in actual victimisation risks.

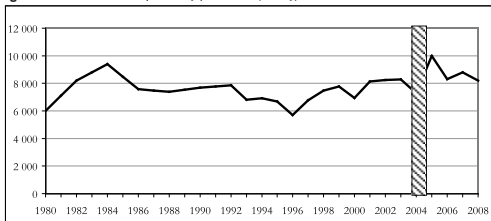
### **3 - England and Wales**

In England and Wales detailed analyses have been made of the concurrence between percentage changes of victimisation rates for comparable subsets of offences and police figures over a period of almost three decades (Kershaw, Nicholas, Walker, 2008). The results show estimates for 2007/08 and for previous years in England and Wales, with values for reported, recorded and 'all BCS' indexed to 1981 values as 100%. It also illustrates how reporting and recording rates have varied

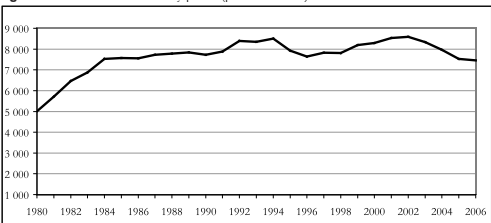
**Figure 3a** Total crime reported by victims (survey)



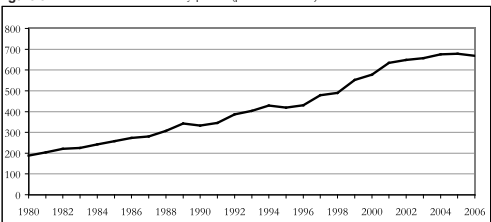
**Figure 3b** Violent crime reported by par victim (survey)



**Figure 3e** Total crime recorded by police (police statistics)

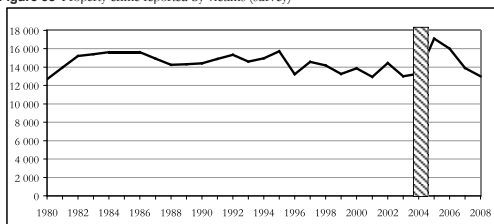


**Figure 3f** Violent crime recorded by police (police statistics)

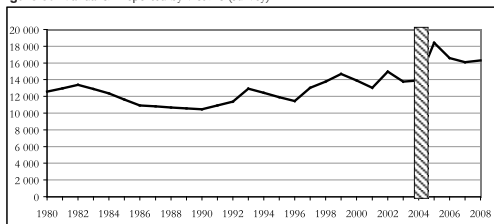


*Figure 3: Trends in total crime and violence according to police figures and victimisation surveys in The Netherlands 1980-2004 (levels per 100,000)*

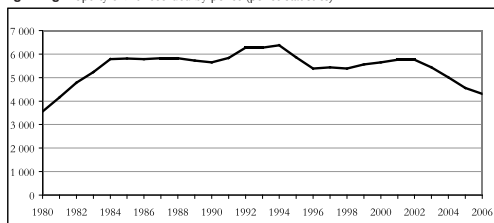
**Figure 3c** Property crime reported by victims (survey)



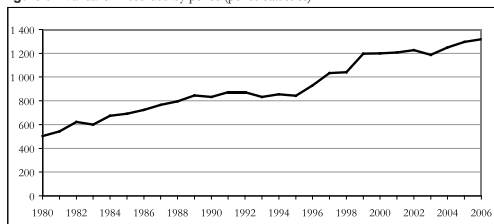
**Figure 3d** Vandalism reported by victims (survey)



**Figure 3g** Property crime recorded by police (police statistics)

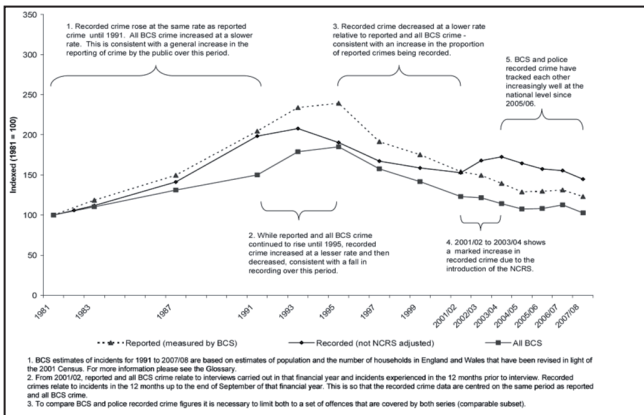


**Figure 3h** Vandalism recorded by police (police statistics)



*Figure 3b: Trends in property crime and vandalism according to police figures and victimisation surveys in The Netherlands 1980-2004 (levels per 100,000)*

over time since 1981. In very general terms, reporting rates increased throughout the 1980s and then stabilised. Police recording have fluctuated in different ways at different times. In the early 1990s there is evidence that the police – possibly under political pressure to show falls in crime – reduced their recording rates. From 1998 onwards, a series of policy changes encouraged the police to adopt policies of full recording, which explains the rather erratic recent trends in recorded crime in the five years after 1998. These changes now appear to have bedded in, and recently (since 2004) all three trend lines show a broadly consistent pattern.



1. BCS estimates of incidents for 1991 to 2007/08 are based on estimates of population and the number of households in England and Wales that have been revised in light of the 2001 Census.

2. From 2001/02, reported and all BCS crime relate to interviews carried out in the financial year and incidents experienced in the 12 months prior to interview. Recorded crimes relate to incidents in the 12 months up to the end of September of that financial year. This is so that the recorded crime data are centred on the same period as reported and all BCS crime.

3. To compare BCS and police recorded crime figures, it is necessary to limit both to a set of offences that are covered by both series (comparable subset).

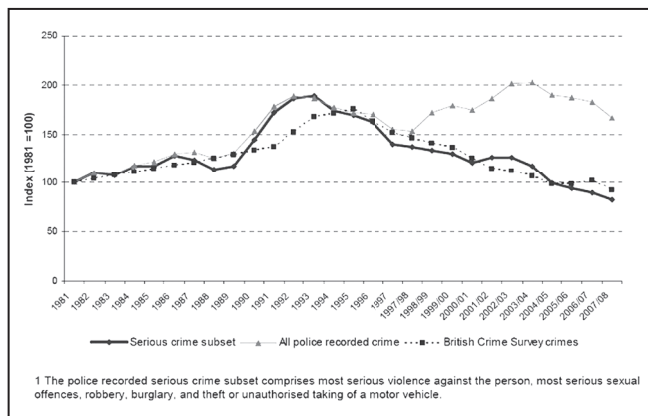
4. The National Crime Recording Standard is a recording standard aimed at promoting greater consistency between police forces in the recording of crime and taking a more victim-oriented approach to crime recording.

Source: Kershaw, Nicholas, Walker, 2008

Figure 4: Comparing BCS trends with police statistics

What is clear, however, is that, as in The Netherlands, most of the turbulence in the recording process has affected the less serious categories of crime. Figure 5

shows that indexed trends for serious recorded crime largely track the trend for all BCS crime – with the exception of the period in the early 1990s, when recording rates fell even for serious offences. The upward trend in *all* recorded crimes around the turn of the century is largely an artefact of changes in the recording process of less serious offences.



Source: Kershaw, Nicholas, Walker, 2008

Figure 5 Trends in 'All BCS', all recorded crime and a 'serious subset' of recorded crime

## 4 - Switzerland

In Switzerland, comparisons between victimisation rates and police figures are especially difficult because uniform crime statistics at the national or federal level are not readily available. Adjusted rates of burglary, non-motor vehicle theft and robbery from the two sources showed remarkable convergence<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> The dramatic drop in the survey rate of theft of motorcycles, mopeds and scooters during the late 1980s, was probably influenced by a change in the law, which made compulsory the wearing of helmets. Police data show a similar trend, though it is less pronounced, possibly because minor incidents often went unrecorded, particularly during the 1980s, when vehicles were often recovered rapidly.



However, adjusted rates for violent crime show diverging results as is apparent in figure 6.

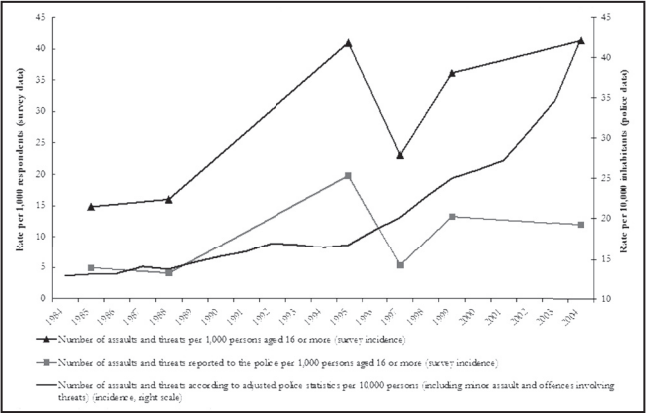


Figure 6: Trends in assault and threats during one year according to the Swiss crime victim surveys and Swiss police statistics

First, survey-based results on simple assaults show higher numbers not only of actual, but even of reported incidents than the police figures. Second, over the last ten years the level of violent crime has gone up more steeply in police figures than according to survey results on actual or reported crime. The main explanation for these findings given in the national report is that police recording of violent crime used to be deliberately restrained for both legal and policy considerations (including the policy of tolerance for open drugs scenes in Zurich and elsewhere) but has since the mid nineties become stricter. Obviously the explosive growth in recorded violent crime reflects changes in policing rather than in actual violence.

### 5 - France

In France the latest studies of concurrence in the trends of survey-based data and police figures span a period of ten years (1994-2004). The results show several in-

stances of significant divergence (Zauberman, Robert, Névanen, Didier, 2009). As can be seen in figure 7 rates of actual and reported burglary are significantly higher according to the surveys than the official figures. Moreover rates of victimisation by burglary have gone down with almost 50% since 1995 according to national victimisation surveys while police figures have remained constant over a time span of twenty years.

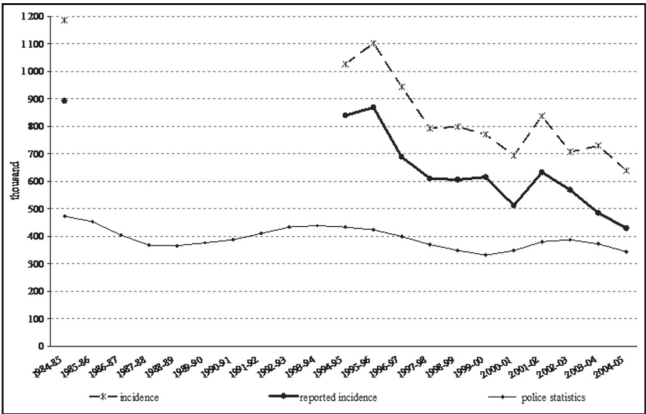


Figure 7 Trends in burglary in France according to survey-based data and police figures , 1984-2005; data from Zauberman, Robert, Névanen, Didier, 2009

The blatant divergence between victimisation rates and police figures on burglary in France over the past decade has been noticed in previous studies (Lagrange *et al.*, 2004). According to the authors, police figures reflect the decreases in rates of victimisation by burglary in a reduced way: *A sort of institutional inertia limits – or at the least retards – the response of the administration to an increase or decrease of the raw materials brought to them in the form of victim reports of crime* (Zauberman *et al.*, 2009, 38).

The French experience shows several other instances of divergence between the two sources. Petty thefts have declined according to the surveys in recent years but their level remained constant according to the po-

lice figures. In the domain of violence, comparisons are complicated by definitional differences. The results show that aggravated assaults have gone up much more significantly according to police statistics than according to crime surveys. According to the authors police figures on aggravated violence have surged as a result of a series of new laws reclassifying more and more types of violence as aggravated assault.

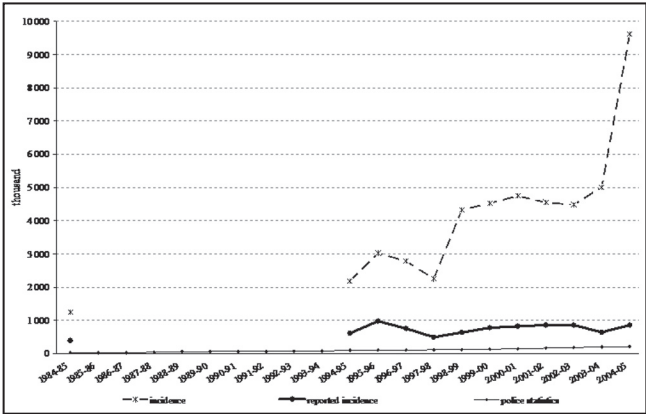


Figure 8: Trends in threats/ simple assaults in France according to victimisation surveys and police figures, 1994-2005; data from Zauberman, Robert, Névanen, Didier, 2009

The findings on simple assaults confirm the magnitude of the dark numbers for these types of crime which normally go unreported. In contrast to aggravated assaults, the category of simple assaults shows a significant jump in survey-estimated numbers in recent years which is not reflected in police figures at all.

The divergences between the two sources seem in France somewhat more pronounced than elsewhere. We are inclined to agree with Zauberman *et al.* (2009) that police figures have failed to properly reflect the decreases in property crimes as well as the increase in overall violent crime. The surge in aggravated assaults seems largely caused by changes in legislation and in recording policies.

## 6 - A summing up

The four countries from which elaborate trend data from both surveys and police administrations are available suggest the following general conclusions regarding concurrence between these two systems. In The Netherlands the stable or declining rates of victimisation by crime have not been adequately reflected in police figures. This is most noticeable the case with petty violence and vandalism. Focussed analyses have demonstrated that the divergence has been caused by improved police recording. In England and Wales police figures seem to have deflated increases in crime in the nineties and to have inflated rates of crime thereafter. As in the Netherlands, the recent spike in violent crime in England and Wales seems largely caused by improved police recording of crimes.

In Switzerland, the police, as in the Netherlands and England and Wales, seem to have improved recording of violent crime in recent years, thereby creating an artificial boom in the official count of violent crime. In France, the two series show divergence in their trends of burglary and petty theft. Stable or decreasing rates of victimisation have not been adequately reflected in police figures, most probably due to better police recording. In France recent increases in petty violence have not been reflected in police figures, as was also the case in England and Wales and Switzerland in the mid 1990s. The recent boom in aggravated violent crime in France seems to be an artefact of changed laws and policies. In this it resembles the surges in violent crime apparent in the Swiss, Dutch and British police figures.

By and large, the results from the four countries indicate that trends in many types of crimes according to the two sources have been divergent due to improvements in police recording of victim reports and, to a lesser extent, increased reporting by victims to the police. The country reports clearly confirm the conclusion that po-

lice figures in Europe are highly sensitive to changes in the recording policies and practices of the police and cannot be taken at face value. The hypothesis of stable proportions of 'dark numbers' is unequivocally refuted for these countries in the period under study. The results leave little room of optimism about the capacity of police figures to monitor changes in volume crime over time in other countries.

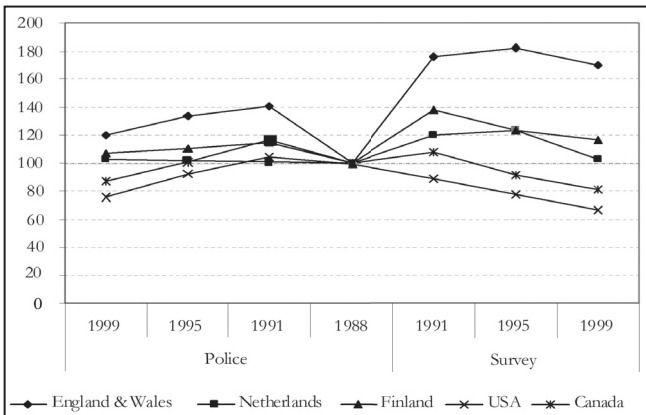
In the USA several studies have been carried out into the concurrence of trends in survey-estimated counts of crime and police figures since the launch of the NCVS in 1973. An overview of results is given by McDowall and Loftin (2007). In the USA the surveys have shown significant decreases of victimisations for theft and burglary since the 1980s and for more serious crimes since the 1990s. These decreases are not or only weakly reflected in trends in police figures. As in the four European countries, the main explanation for these divergences is improved reporting by the public and improved recording by the police.

In a focussed analysis Rosenfeld (2007) looked at the divergence between survey-estimated counts of aggravated assaults and comparable police figures. Police-recorded aggravated assault trend upwards during the 1980s and flatten in the 1990s, whereas survey-estimated assaults are flat during the 1980s and decline during the 1990s. Rosenfeld's analysis shows that the upward trend in police figures for aggravated assault results from 'heightened police productivity' in recording such crimes. The conclusions on the analysis of data from the European countries is broadly in line with the general observation of McDowall and Loftin that over the past two decades the measurement of crime by the police has improved while survey-based measurements have remained more or less the same.

## 7 - Other studies

Farrington, Langan and Tonry (2004) compared trends in national victimisation rates with police-recorded crimes of eight Western countries for the period 1980 to 2000. With regard to the similarity between the trends in the two measures over time their results are mixed. For burglary the two trends were significantly correlated for six of the eight countries. For robbery only two countries showed similar trends in police figures as in victimisation rates. Reviewing the available data, Cook and Khmilevska (2005) observed that recorded data and survey results exhibited very different growth rates.

In the framework of reports on the ICVS, comparisons have been made between changes in prevalences of victimisation and comparable subsets of police figures for countries that have participated several times in the ICVS. For some countries, comparisons can be made between the trends in ICVS victimisation rates and the trends in total recorded crime. Figure 9 presents the trends of police statistics and ICVS victimisation



Source: Van Kesteren, Mayben, Nieuwbeerta, 2000

Figure 9: Police and survey crime trends, five countries 1988-1999 (index 1988=100)

for total crime in five countries between 1988 and 1999, with observations corresponding to the years covered by the four repetitions of the ICVS (1988, 1991, 1995 and 1999, the calendar year preceding the interviews). Both victimisation rates and police figures are indexed at one hundred for 1988. Taking 1988 as the starting point, the trends on the left and on the right show considerable symmetry. To a large extent the two trends mirror each other in each country. Crime went up between 1988 and 1991, stabilised or decreased between 1991 and 1995, then further decreased between 1995 and 1999. In the USA the crime drop seems to have started a bit earlier.

As can be seen in the graph, police-recorded crimes show as a rule less marked variation than victimisation rates. The trend analyses indicate that police figures tend to deflate rather than inflate drops in actual crime.

In the USA several analysts have analysed correlational convergence between the trends in NCVS-based rates and UCR figures over the past thirty years (McDowall, Loftin, 2007). Reasonably strong correlation coefficients were found for burglary, robbery and motor vehicle theft but not for any other types of crime. Analyses using survey-estimates corrected for, *inter alia*, reporting rates tended to show stronger correlations.

In our analyses of the results of the fifth round of the ICVS, we have also looked at congruence between the change estimates during the last few years according to the ICVS and the European Sourcebook (ICVS: 1999-2004; recorded crime: 1999-2003). Comparisons were made between (i) trends in incidence victimisation rates and harmonised police figures; and (ii) trends in incidence victimisation rates adjusted for reporting and trends in harmonised police figures. Table 3 shows results.

Crime type	Incident rates and Recorded		Reported and Recorded	
Motor vehicle theft	0. 31	14	0. 45	13
Theft	0. 02	14	0. 01	13
Robbery	0. 47	15	0. 50	15
Assault	0. 13	15	0. 06	15
Sexual	-0. 33	15	-0. 35	15
Total contact	0. 17	15	0. 23	15

*Table 3: Correlations of trends in crime levels (1999 to 2003 - 2004) and number of countries*

The trends in either victimisation or reported victimisation and police recorded crime during a period of 4 to 5 years hardly correlate at all, or, as in the case of sexual crimes, they correlate negatively. Only for motor vehicle theft and robbery weak positive correlations were found. For no single crime type a correlation coefficient of .80 or more was calculated. This negative result is broadly in line with those of Cook and Khmivska (2005).

The conclusion that trends in crime statistics from two sources are divergent does not by itself suggest that one of the two reflects trends in volume crime better than the other. In England, Shepherd and Sivaramasingam (2005) compared trends in both series with that of a third. They found that decreases in rates of victimisation by violent crime matched decreases according to hospital admissions but differed from the increases in police-recorded violent crimes. Their interpretation of this divergence is that police recording had been improved due to new policing priorities and better technical support (e.g. from CCTV's).

This interpretation confirms the conclusions of the national country reports mentioned above. The available evidence suggests that police recorded crime data



are too much affected by changes in recording practices to be useful as trend measures of volume crime. To determine trends in actual volume crime, especially also in a comparative perspective, periodically repeated crime victim surveys seem an indispensable tool. To facilitate cross-national comparisons such surveys should ideally be standardised.

We will revert to this issue in the final paragraph.

## **V - Towards a systemic understanding of divergences between police figures and survey findings**

The results of the national reports and of other available studies suggest that police figures, although indispensable for the assessment of homicides and other serious and rare crimes, are unreliable indicators of the level as well as trends in volume crime.

Police figures seem not to be unreliable in a random sort of way. The observation by Zauberman *et al.* (2009) that French police figures seem to reflect changes in actual crime in a deflated or delayed way seems to have general applicability. This phenomenon of ‘institutional inertia’ has been observed both in the USA and in several other European countries besides France over the past ten or twenty years. This finding suggests the operation of similar forces affecting the production of police figures across the board. The phenomenon of institutional inertia in crime recording calls, in other words, for a further theoretical elaboration.

Criminal justice systems can, within existing budgets and organisational means, respond adequately to only a given number of crimes per year. If more crimes enter the system than can be timely and adequately processed by police, prosecutors, courts or prison departments, the system gets clogged and becomes inefficient. Such system overload generates an institutional need to control

the input of new cases. Prosecutors will feel pressed to dismiss less serious cases in order to clean their desks and reduce delays in bringing cases to court (Van Dijk, Steinmetz, 1980). In response to these dismissals police forces will save resources by becoming less pro-active in the detection of volume offences and ignoring citizen's reports of less serious crimes by victims (e.g. petty thefts and simple assaults). Such selective recording by the police, whether formalised in guidelines or not, will soon be observed by the public. If victims sense that reports of minor offences are dismissed routinely, they will subsequently refrain from reporting such incidents. They will lift their threshold for reporting crimes to the police.

In our view criminal justice systems effectively exercise control over their input of cases and thereby over their workload. Criminal justice systems do not acknowledge the existence of more crime than what it can properly handle within existing resources. Crime is recorded by the system to the extent that resources permit (Van Dijk, Steinmetz, 1980; Van Dijk, 2007). From this theoretical perspective, the number of police-recorded crimes must primarily be seen as an indicator of the capacity of national law enforcement, prosecution systems and courts systems to process crime cases. Since the available means of police systems and prosecution are generally scarce and determined by factors other than the volume of crime, such as tax revenues, the relationship between police-recorded crimes and the level of crime will always be tenuous at best. More recorded crime reflects availability of more resources rather than more crime.

By the same token police figures are likely to distort changes in levels of crime as well. In years of sudden increases in the number of crimes reported to the police, police administrations and prosecution services will soon be clogged. Reporting victims will have to wait longer, and responsible officers will be inclined to increase thresholds for recording. These processes will

in turn discourage victims from reporting. Police figures will therefore often reflect surges in actual crime in a deflated way. Examples are the deflated increases in overall recorded crime in several Western countries depicted in figure 9 in the early 1990s. In contrast, in years of sudden decreases of crimes reported to the police, available human resources will become free for other activities. Such temporary abundance of available resources in police forces can result in improved recording of certain categories of crimes, inviting more reporting of such crimes by victims. Decreases in actual crime will thus partly be offset by better recording and more reporting, resulting in a deflated reflection of the decrease in crime in police statistics of crime.

In the case of the USA and, more recently, France, England and Wales, The Netherlands and Switzerland significant decreases of various forms of crime over the past ten or twenty years seem to have freed resources that have subsequently been used for other purposes. This situation seems to have invited the adoption of new legislation or/and policing priorities to tackle problems of crime perceived to be urgent, notably various forms of violent crime in both public and private domains. This factor seems to have caused increases in police-recorded crimes such as burglaries and aggravated assaults in France and violent crime in England/Wales, The Netherlands and Switzerland. These politico-bureaucratic dynamics can help to explain why the dramatic drops in crime observed in crime surveys in recent years are in many countries not fully reflected in police statistics and why police figures in some countries suggest sudden booms in violence that may not really have occurred.

## **VI - Conclusions and policy implications**

The comparisons between the level of crime according to police figures of recorded crime and results of victimisation surveys in selected European countries,

have confirmed that police figures of recorded crime cover only a relatively small part of the victimisations experienced by the public. The size of the dark numbers appears not be constant across countries. Dark numbers seem to be larger among some of the new Member States of the Union. Although levels of victimisation by crime in Central and Eastern Europe no longer differ much from those in the West, the levels of police-recorded crime remain remarkably low (Aebi *et al.*, 2006). For example in 2000, the European countries recorded on average 4,333 crimes per 100,000 people. Most Central and Eastern European countries showed crime rates far below this European average. Results from the ICVS on reporting patterns go some way in explaining this gap. Victims in the new Member States are much less likely to report their experiences as victims to the police, most probably because they have little confidence in the professionalism of the police. Lack of insurance coverage might also contribute to low reporting rates for property crimes in these countries.

The analyses also confirmed that the size of the dark number is highly variable over time. In some European countries divergences between the results of the two systems seem even larger than those observed in the USA. One likely explanation is that both police figures and victimisation surveys in these European countries have been less rigorously standardised than in the USA.

In many European countries victims of crime have over the past twenty years become somewhat more ready to report victimisations to the police. In addition, and more consequentially for the stability of police figures, police forces in some Western European countries have significantly lowered their thresholds for recording less serious crimes. As a result, decreases in actual levels of volume crime are not adequately reflected in police figures of these countries. In some cases recent police figures show dramatic increases in some types of violence which are not grounded in increases of actual violence.

Analysts in the USA have noticed that convergence between the two series has improved during the last decade. Data from the four European countries, notably from The Netherlands and England and Wales, also point to stronger convergence in recent years than before. Police forces in these countries seem to have become somewhat better in recording crimes. Unfortunately, improved crime recording in Western European countries does not improve the prospects for a statistical system of crime information based on police figures in the European Union. Limited availability of resources for the police and the criminal justice system at large and a correspondingly low level of confidence among the public are likely to impact negatively on crime recording in the new Member States. Moreover, our understanding of the production of police figures suggest that if resources for law enforcement and criminal justice and insurance coverage among the new Member States of the EU catch up with those elsewhere in the Union, police figures of crime in these countries are bound to rise, even when the level of crime may in reality remain stable or decrease.

Compared to police figures from countries with more established police recording systems such as, for example, Scandinavian countries, police figures from many of the new members are comparatively 'unsaturated'. Police figures in the latter countries have the potential to absorb a larger proportion of the 'dark numbers' than is currently the case. Through improved recording and higher trust levels police figures could double or triple without any changes in the numbers of crimes committed. In this respect the stabilisation of police figures in several of the new members should perhaps not even be seen as a positive sign, indicating greater control over crime. This stabilisation could also be a sign of stagnating processes of modernisation and democratisation of the criminal justice systems and law enforcement agencies in these countries. If police forces in the new Member States improve their performance higher di-

vergences between survey-based estimates and police figures are to be expected for some time.

Some authors have argued that police-recorded crime statistics could be used for the measurement of change over time across countries under the assumption that reporting and recording rates remain more or less stable over the years in each country (Bennett, 1991). This assumption is implicitly shared by Eurostat in Luxembourg which has started to release change estimates of police figures from the different Member States and associated countries in its *Statistics in Focus* bulletin (Tavares, Thomas, 2008). In our view, the results of the current study show that the interpretation of past trends in police figures must be carried out with due caution. Trends in European police figures in future years might become even less trustworthy as indicator of changes in the volume of crime.

## **1 - The needs of a standardised victimisation survey for Europe**

The European Union Action Plan 2006-2010 envisages the development of comparative crime statistics among the Member States including a common module for victimisation surveys. The conclusions of the CRIMPREV workshop underline the need of promoting standardised victimisation surveys in the European Union. The use of police figures of recorded crime for such comparative purposes will almost inevitably result in erroneous conclusions, especially concerning future trends in crime among some of the new Member States. Without a victimisation survey, any comparison between the level and movements of volume crime across the Member States will remain a hazardous, and politically contentious, undertaking.

The single most important objective of the European survey would seem to be to provide an indicator of the

relative level of volume crime in the Member States in a comparative, cross-national perspective. More specifically the survey should allow countries to determine how their relative positions change over the years. This would allow national governments as well as the European institutions to benchmark national crime prevention and control policies of Member States and to assess the efficacy of Europe-wide policies.

In many countries the planned standardised European victimisation survey will complement existing, scaled down national surveys such as the ones in France, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland (five repeats of the ICVS), Estonia (four repeats of the ICVS), United Kingdom and Switzerland. Divergences between the level estimates based on the European survey and those of national surveys seem inevitable. Such divergence should be explained to the media as resulting from methodological differences. In the past media have largely ignored divergences in level estimates between national surveys and the ICVS. Media reports have rightly focused on changes in the relative positions of countries according to the ICVS. In our view a European survey should not be marketed as the final answer about crime in the Union but as an approximation of the relative severity of problems of volume crime in each of the Member States.

The questions on victimisation experiences should focus on those offences that surveys can measure best, that is 'stereotypic' volume crime. It seems important to also include a set of standardised and well-tested questions on reporting behaviour and on feelings of safety. Reporting rates are an important indicator of police performance. In many countries criminal policies are set in response to assumptions about fear of crime or lost of trust in institutions rather than to information about levels and trends of actual crime.

Both in the United States and Europe moves have recently been made to scale down the sample sizes and questionnaires of the national victimisation surveys.

At the same time initiatives are taken to supplement household surveys on crime with additional vehicles of data gathering in special crime areas (e.g. commercial surveys, dedicated surveys on domestic violence and surveys of medical data on violence) (Maxfield, Hough, Mayhew, 2007). For cost reasons a standardised, comparative survey for Europe should preferably be relatively modest in scope and sample size. This feature inevitably limits the capacity of the survey to produce estimates of rarer forms of serious crime but probably enhances its sustainability.

If the European survey is geared towards measuring changes over time in the ranking of countries in terms of crime risks, this argues for an alignment of its methodology, especially its questionnaire, with the one of the ICVS. Such alignment would allow a comparative analysis of trends going back twenty years or more in a majority of Member States. Without such alignment no historical data will be available for trend analyses. Alignment would also preserve the unique option of comparing long term European crime trends with those in the USA, Canada, Australia/New Zealand, Japan and other countries committed to continue participating in the ICVS<sup>9</sup>.

## **2 - Complementary information on crime**

Although the launch of a standardised European victimisation survey seems indispensable to inform coordinated policies in the domain of crime and justice, this instrument should not be regarded as a sufficient source

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<sup>9</sup> The ICVS was repeated in 2008 in Japan and Estonia. A sixth round of the ICVS, pilot testing new modes of data collection, is planned for the Autumn 2009 in the USA, Canada, Australia, England Wales, The Netherlands, Germany, Denmark and Sweden. Parallel to this, a more extensive draft questionnaire for a European Victimisation Survey will be pilot tested in 17 Member States in the course of 2009 (Aromaa *et al.*, 2007).



of comparative crime information in Europe. For a fuller picture of European crime problems survey results must be complemented as a minimum by statistics on police recorded crimes. To complement the survey-estimated data on volume crime, sustained efforts to collect comparative police figures should give special priority to homicides and attempted homicides. Police figures on car theft, burglary and robbery should be collected for monitoring purposes. Comparisons with survey-based estimates of the same types of crime can help to identify changes in police recording productivity.

These core statistics on crime should be complemented by secondary statistics from health institutions on violence, including sexual violence (death certificates and hospital or emergency units' admissions). Periodically, standardised surveys should be carried out about self reported delinquency and drugs use and on crimes against businesses and violence between intimates. Added to these could be assessments from specialised state institutions or non-government organisations of trends in grand corruption, organised crime, financial fraud, money-laundering and human trafficking (Van Dijk, 2007b).

To underline the complementarity of existing crime statistics, they should ideally be presented in an integrated fashion. In the debate at the seminar, it was observed that the production of crime statistics in many countries is occasionally subject to bureaucratic infighting and politically motivated manipulation. In the context of international or supranational organisations comparative crime statistics are extraordinarily politically sensitive (Van Dijk, 2007a). In order to promote a favourable reception of a future system of European statistics, comparative statistics should preferably be presented in the form of a comprehensive, annual European Report on Trends in Crime and Justice. Such report should add an explanatory context to the crime trends presented and address topics of cross-national

interest. To prevent undue political interference in the preparation of such report, its production should be overseen by an independent board of experts comparable to the one overseeing the work of the European Centre for Drugs Monitoring in Lisbon or the Human Rights Centre in Vienna.

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